

Walter Soernsen, as told to Maxine Kortum Durney,  
November 6 1989.

My father was Frederick Soernsen, who came from the Isle of Fohr, when it was a German holding. Here in Petaluma there was a fellow by the name of Mahoney who had a hay press and needed cheap labor. Mahoney sponsored a lot of people like my father who came here, and worked for him two seasons baling hay. They all had to have sponsors, they didn't have the money to get here on their own.

My father had a chicken ranch on Bodega Avenue, on the Petaluma side of the Corliss chicken ranch.

My mother's people came earlier, also from the Isle of Fohr. Martin Bundesen, my grandfather, was a ship's captain, came round the horn, and came to Petaluma to settle on Monte Vista avenue, a place now owned by Dr. Roberts. Martin Bundesen was one of the first ranchers in Petaluma to start the Mercantile Exchange, a co-op, five men, who weren't getting enough money for their eggs. Later it turned into the Poultry Producers of Central California.

I had two sisters and a brother; Helena, who married Bob Rice; Dora, who married Frank Blankenship; Harold, my brother. They were all older than I was. I was born May 26 1911.

As children we went to Wilson school, and came home every afternoon to work.

Father had 37 acres, with all the birds in colony houses. At one time he was selling large eggs for a dollar a dozen, shipping them to San Francisco on the Steamer Gold. He went broke in the thirties, Golden Eagle took him over.

I left home when I was seven. My parents separated, and I went to live with and work for Jack Hoover, who bought and sold poultry. Before I went to school in the morning I'd catch chickens for him, often I would miss the first hours of school.

A year later Hoover was caught with phony weights. I left, went to live with my sister Dora and brother-in-law.

When I was sixteen I drove truck to the city for a fellow. This was 1927.

Before the trucks went to San Francisco in the late twenties, the chickens were sent there on the steamers. This came to an end when the steamers were losing out to the trucks. All the produce was shipped out of here then on trucks...eggs, chickens, potatoes.



But a lot of the feed came up the river in bulk, on barges, pulled by tugs. Del Maestro ran a tug boat. Ted Mastrup brought shells up the river on a barge.

My truck was a model T Ford, had a ruxtle rear end. The two failings of the Ford were insufficient gear ratio and bum brakes. The Ruxtle axle was an addition that provided two gear ratios, an over and an under. It gave you both a lower low and a higher high. Over the Corte Madera grade I'd have to shift down to control it, because it had no brakes.

I would have a load of twenty five coops holding live birds. If it were old stewing hens, there'd be twenty five birds to a coop. If it were broilers (there was no such thing as a frier then)...that is, young roosters raised for meat birds, there could be 50 birds to a coop. They were nine pounds to a dozen birds, up to two pounds each.

Everyone would get off the road when I came, I was carrying so many chicken coops and the road was so narrow. The truck had single tires which you blew out half the time. I'd have to sit there and grunt to get those nuts off to change the tire.

It took two hours from Petaluma to the Sausalito ferry.

I went to the city five days a week. In between chickens I hauled beer; during Prohibition, you know.

Farmers mixed their own feeds in those days...bran, middlings (ground up oats), concentrates. The birds didn't fatten as fast as they do now with the additives now used.

For special orders there for 3/4 pound birds, live weight; also 1 pound and 1 and 1/2 pound birds. When they arrived in San Francisco they were taken to commission houses, mostly all on Battery and Front streets. There they were fed for a week on a milk mash. It put color in their skin. Then they were sold.

When I was eighteen in 1929 I began to buy and sell chickens. My future mother-in-law, Mrs. Wotherspoon, loaned me the money.

Later her daughter Ruth became my wife. In 1936 we ran away to get married, in Reno, the first day of 1936.

I bought a 2nd hand Model A, in Oakland, for myself.

In those days a farmer sometimes had a whole house full of chickens he wanted to sell, because he wanted to put his new pullets in that house. He would call me and I would buy them. They could be three, four or five years old, all mixed together. When you took them to the commission house they were graded: #1 a "fancy" hen with a good large breast; #2 a thinner breast, with



a "CB", a crooked breast bone; rejects, thin, not much meat; hypo, no meat, egg bound or water bellies. These last went to Oberti in the McNamara building in Penngrove. He was a junk man, People came from San Francisco daily to buy these hens.

I paid cash on the spot.

Nowadays the growers will have a whole house, 25 to 30,000 chickens, all the same age.

During the Depression when people were going under, I was picking up chickens for Hunt and Behrens, the feed mill. When people owed money I was to pick the chickens up and take them to market for Hunt and Behrens. It was a tough thing to do. The women would be crying. In some cases I'd pick the chickens up, pay Hunt and Behrens with my own money, then I'd take most of the birds back, and put them back in the houses. I lost nothing. I didn't get paid right away, but I'd get a little all the time. The families had no skills, there were no jobs, they had no other way to make a living. They would start buying grain again from Hunt and Behrens, but the slate was clean.

I raised rat terriers, and still do. When we moved the colony houses on my father's place, then the rats would jump out. They'd been living under the floors. Then our rat terriers would go to work. The older dogs will train the younger ones, but once I trained one of the young ones. I put him in a feed barrel in which I'd caught three rats. It was either the rats or that dog who would come out alive. One of the rats bit his leg. He killed all three, but the one that he crushed over and over again was the one that bit his leg. In Scotland, I learned, that's the way they teach the Scottie dogs to kill rats.

I am a Shriner, and associated with Shriner's Hospital in San Francisco. If you know of crippled children who need help, let me know.



PETALUMA HISTORICAL MUSEUM  
Oral History Program

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PLACE Petaluma, Ca.

DATE

5/8/93

Walter Soerensen  
(Interviewee)

Mark Durney  
(for the Petaluma Historical Museum)



# PETALUMA HISTORICAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

## Oral History Program

### Narrator Personal Information Questionnaire

Name Soerensen Walter Andrew  
 Last First Middle (Maiden)  
 Address 1002 Bodega Avenue  
Petaluma Ca 94952

Marital status: Married ☒ Single ☐ Divorced ☐ Widowed ☐  
 Birthdate 5/26/11 Birthplace Petaluma, Ca  
 Length of residence in Petaluma (or Sonoma County) all my life

Education: Elementary school \_\_\_\_\_  
 Secondary school Freshman Grad No  
 College \_\_\_\_\_ Grad \_\_\_\_\_  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation(s) or former occupations(s) \_\_\_\_\_  
Poultry Dealer

Travels \_\_\_\_\_

Organizations, clubs Masonic Lodge, I. O. O. F.,  
Masonic Lodge affiliates.

Other special interests \_\_\_\_\_  
Volunteering.

Additional comments \_\_\_\_\_

THANK YOU!



# PETALUMA HISTORICAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

## Oral History Program

### Family History Questionnaire

	<u>Name</u>	<u>Birthdate</u>	<u>Birthplace</u>	<u>Deceased? Date</u>
<u>Parents*</u>	Fred Soernsen		Germany	1935
	Alma Bundesen		Petaluma	1951

Brothers & Sisters

Harold Soernsen

Dora Blankenship

Helena Rice

Grand-parents\*

Martin Bundesen

Marie Bundesen

Spouse

Ruth Witherspoon Soernsen

Children

Walter Andrew Soernsen, Jr.

William Soernsen (Deceased)

Penelope Soernsen Spaletta

Grandchildren

Kelly, Kerry & Andrew Soernsen

Low, Carla, Gina, Josie,

Ralph & William Spaletta

\*Please include maiden name of mother and grandmothers.

THANK YOU!